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Special Education Teachers Response to Consistent Changes in Curriculum Standards

Megan Fromme

Georgia Southern University

**Special Education Teachers Response to Consistent Changes in Curriculum Standards**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the  
College of Education

By

Megan Fromme

Under the mentorship of Dr. Meca Williams-Johnson

**Abstract**

This research explored how the changing standards have influenced special education teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students, and the teachers' perceptions of the consistent changes in standards. A narrative, qualitative design was used, which involved eight participant interviews. In each interview, the participants answered questions pertaining to their level of comfort teaching the Common Core Standards and Georgia Standards of Excellence, whether or not they received professional development on the standards, and what they think of the new standards. Currently, there is a paucity of research regarding teacher's perspectives on curriculum standards, and this research project fills the gap.

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Finally, I wish to thank my family and friends for supporting me through all of the highs and lows that came with completing this project. Your support has helped me reach this point.

## Introduction

Two main factors that effect a student with special needs, are the student's individualized education plan and the standards with which they are taught. Some have called the Common Core Standards a "blueprint for instruction" (Murphy & Marshall, 2015). A student's individualized education plan can be affected by the standards taught due to the difficulty of the content and the manner in which it is presented. The standards also dictate what accommodations a student can receive. According to Audrey Figueroa Murphy and Elizabeth Haller's article titled *Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core Standards for English Language Learners and Students With Disabilities* (2015), "the CCSS [Common Core State Standards] explicitly avoid providing any stated accommodations" (p. 511). An individualized education plan, also known as an IEP, is an essential part of the education of a student with special needs. A student's IEP acts as a map, laying out why, when, where, and how they will receive special education and related services. An IEP must contain the following components as laid out by the federal law:

evaluation data, indicating how the disability affects individuals' participation in educational activities; current levels of educational performance; the types of special education and related services and supplementary aids and services necessary for the individual to benefit from the educational program; measurable long-term and short-term goals; the extent the individual will not participate in general education and extracurricular activities with individuals without disabilities (also known as least restrictive environment); modifications needed for the individual to participate in district or state wide assessments; timelines to

include the dates to begin services, length and duration of services, and location of services; transition plans; how individual progress will be measured and reported; and team members (Blosser & Neidecker, 2002; McCormick, 2003; Paul, 2007).

These components allow teachers to help their students with disabilities receive the appropriate education that they are guaranteed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Part B of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The standards that a student is taught play an obvious role in their education. In the past decade or so, Georgia has seen three different sets of standards come and go, starting with QCC, then GPS, and now the Common Core Standards. The newest set of standards, Georgia Standards of Excellence, were implemented for the 2015-2016 school year. With these changes in the standards, there has been a change in the education of students with special needs, whether the change be in the accommodations and modifications they receive, the things they are tested on, or which grade level standards they must follow. At the moment, there is a paucity of research regarding this subject, and this research project seeks to fill the gap.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to highlight how the changing standards have influenced special education teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students, and the teachers' perceptions of the Common Core standards.

## **Research Questions**

1. How have changing standards influenced special education teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of the Common Core and Georgia Standards of Excellence?

## **Review of Literature**

The Common Core Standards have become a hot topic over the past couple of years. Common Core Standards were released in 2010 and were developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. "The Common Core State Standards Initiative developed these standards as a state-led effort to establish consensus in expectations for student knowledge and skills that should be developed in Grades K-12" (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011, p.103). The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) include descriptions of the content and cognitive skills for each grade level and tests that can be used to assess if students have mastered the skills and content for the respective grade level (Boslaugh, 2015). Although CCSSI is not a national curriculum, Porter et al. (2011) points out four benefits that a national curriculum would bring: shared expectations, focus, efficiency, and quality of assessment. According to Boslaugh (2015), the goal of Common Core Standards is to make sure that all the students in the United States who graduate from high school are ready to succeed in either higher education, a vocational education program, or immediate employment. There is still a lot of discussion as to whether or not Common Core Standards are an improvement to the current state standards and if they will benefit the students. The study conducted by Porter et al. (2011) found that "some

state standards are much more focused and some much less focused than is the Common Core, and this is true for both subjects [mathematics and English language arts]” (p. 115).

### Perception

Murphy and Marshall’s 2015 article, titled “Common Core Preparation in Special Education Programs: Beginning the Conversation,” discusses a study done in North and South Carolina that looked at an overview of professors’ and preservice teachers’ knowledge and comfort with teaching the Common Core Standards. This study also developed key questions to ask in future research and practice to develop knowledge in Common Core Standards, and uncover issues to be addressed in future research dealing with professional development. The professors and preservice teachers who participated in this study had background in either special education or general education. Throughout the study, Murphy and Marshall discussed the results from the interviews and focus groups that were conducted; many of the participants expressed a desire to have more professional development experiences that involved collaboration, a desire to collaborate with other teachers during the transition and implementation of Common Core Standards, the need for more training to teach Common Core Standards, and the lack of knowledge in both the teacher and student roles. The article also discussed a national survey that was conducted through Education Week’s website. The results from this survey showed that most respondents had four or fewer days of total professional development with Common Core Standards (Murphy & Marshall, 2015, pg.168). The survey also looked at additional needs teachers had for helping them be better prepared to teach Common Core Standards; these needs included “access to aligned curricular resources”, “more planning time”, “access to aligned assessments”, and “more time to collaborate with colleagues” (Murphy



& Marshall, 2015, pg.168). These survey results are similar to the results Murphy and Marshall found during the interviews and focus groups conducted during their study.

Another article that looked at teachers' perceptions of the Common Core Standards is one written by Audrey Figueroa Murphy and Elizabeth Haller titled "Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core Standards for English Language Learners and Students With Disabilities" (2015). Murphy and Haller's sought to:

gain insight into the experiences of teachers of English language learners (ELLs) and of students with disabilities (SWD) as they aligned the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with previously used standards and instructional approaches during the first year of CCSS implementation (Murphy & Haller; 2015).

This study explored how teachers of English language learners perceive the Common Core Standards and gives six recommendations on supporting teachers based on what their participants described during interviews.

### Special Education

According to an article written by Beals (2014) appropriately titled "The Common Core Is Tough on Kids With Special Needs" there is only one document from the CCSSI that address students with special needs. This document is "Application to Students with Disabilities," states, "some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities will require substantial supports and accommodations to have meaningful access to certain standards" (Beals, 2014). Beals (2014) added that students with special

needs will need more support to effectively access the standards and mentions that one cannot change a text to match the students' reading level. Therefore, if the student is in fifth grade and reads on a second grade level, a teacher cannot change the assigned text to one that is more suitable for the student's actual reading level. However, a teacher could provide glossaries or storyboards to attempt to improve the students' understanding of a text. The article by McNulty and Gloeckler (2014) entitled "Fewer, Clearer, Higher Common Core State Standards: Implications for Students Receiving Special Education Services" points out the additional supports and services that students with special needs can receive under Common Core Standards, including "instructional strategies based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)", "accommodations, include changes in materials and/or procedures", and "assistive technology devices and services to enable access to the standards" (p. 6). They also point out the Five Key Elements that the International Center for Leadership in Education consider necessary for the support of students with special needs achievement. The International Center for Leadership in Education an organization that helps teachers and schools stay up to date on research-based strategies and best practices. The Five Key Elements are ownership, high expectations, intervention systems, inclusion/collaborative teaching, and organization/professional development. McNulty and Gloeckler (2014) go into detail about each of the elements and give tips on them throughout the article. Haager and Vaughn's (2013) article also looks at the Common Core Standards and students with special needs. Haager and Vaughn point out that it is the teacher's job/burden to find out how and when to adapt standards to suit their students with special needs without falling

behind on other standards. They also provide a short section that has common questions and answers pertaining to Common Core Standards.

### **Curriculum Flaws**

To many researchers, teachers, and even parents the Common Core Standards are deeply flawed. In Tinken's 2011 article, *Common Core Standards: The Emperor Has No Clothes, or Evidence*, he details several ways he believes Common Core to be flawed, including lack of evidence, "economic realities", "data-less decision making", "centralized curriculum planning", "oversimplification", "curriculum research", and "dead ends with questionable means" (p. 58-61). As Tinken examines the evidence, or lack thereof, that the Common Core Standards are supported by, he finds that the document where the majority of the support comes from, *The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development*, has been shown to be "fatally flawed" by independent researchers (2011, p. 59). Tinken states that one way this study is flawed is that they did not compare "apples to apples" when looking at other nations' test scores. Meaning that the study did not compare like factors to show efficiency within the curriculum and Tinker presents this as an overwhelming problematic issue for wide scale curriculum use. It is also concerning because if the Common Core Standards are based on little evidence and that evidence is "fatally flawed," does that in turn make the standards themselves flawed? Tinken also found that "of the 138 cited pieces of evidence, four could be considered empirical studies related directly to the topic of national standards and student achievement" and the rest of the evidence came from newspaper and magazine articles, book chapters, phone interviews, and tangential studies (2011, p. 59). Tinken believes that the US is too diverse for a nationally adopted standards program to effectively teach

all the students, a point that many individuals may agree with (2011). Many individuals may agree with Tinken because they realize that “one size fits all” does not work when it comes to education. Tinken also points to a study by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) who found “the closer the curriculum is designed, deliberated, and created near the student, the greater influence it has on learning,” further supporting the idea that “one size fits all” does not work for education (2011, p. 61).

A study done by Garrison, Lu, and Eckert (2011) looked at the complexity of textbooks over ten decades starting with textbooks from 1910. This study was done to see if the Common Core Standards’ developers claim that textbooks complexity was on the decline was true. The Common Core developers based their claim off of two studies, one by Jeanne Chall and her colleagues (1977), and the other by Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (1996). Chall found that textbooks difficulty declined between 1963 and 1975. Hayes et al. found that sentence length and vocabulary level declined between 1919 and 1991 (2011, p. 381). Garrison, Lu, and Eckert’s study examined text complexity by first looking at how the Common Core Standards defined text complexity; text complexity is “the inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text combined with consideration of reader and task variables” (2011, p. 382). Garrison et al. then examined textbooks, specifically third and sixth grade textbooks, from a period of ten decades starting in 1910, by looking at the lexical score, word frequency band, readability, and mean sentence length of the textbooks. Garrison et al. found that after textbooks made a shift from “reading-for-elocution” to “reading-for-comprehension,” the difficulty of reading for third grade textbooks has been steadily increasing and the text complexity of sixth grade text has remained stable with slight increases since the 1940s (2011, p. 388). These

findings once again lead us to question whether the Common Core Standards are flawed if the evidence they are based on is flawed.

## **Methods**

### **Statement of Problem**

With four different changes in Georgia's standards in the past decade, there has been a change in the education of students with special needs, whether the change be in the accommodations and modifications they receive, the things they are tested on, or which grade level standards they must follow. The purpose of this study will highlight how the changing standards have influenced special education teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students, and teachers' perceptions of the Common Core standards and Georgia Standards of Excellence. The study will address the following questions:

1. How have changing standards influenced special education teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of the Common Core and Georgia Standards of Excellence?

### **Participants**

The participants for this study will include eight special education teachers in Bulloch county area that have taught Georgia Performance Standards and Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. The below table provides an overview of the participants.

**Table 1: Participant Data**

<b>Participant*</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Grade(s) Taught</b>	<b>Subject(s) Taught</b>	<b>Classroom Type</b> (self-contained, resource, co-taught)
Nancy	24	Preschool, Kindergarten, First, Second, Fifth	English Language Arts, Math	Resource
Abby	15	Second, Fourth	English Language Arts, Math	Resource
Whitney	33	Third, Fourth	English Language Arts, Math	Resource
Sabrina	13	Kindergarten, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth	English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies	Self-contained
Stacy	23	Kindergarten, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth	Reading	Resource
Alicia	11	Fourth, Fifth	English Language Arts	Resource, Co-taught
Catherine	8	Sixth	English Language Arts, Math	Resource, Co-taught
Jackie	12	Sixth, Seventh, Eighth	English Language Arts	Resource, Co-taught

\*Pseudonyms given for each participant

## **Design**

The study used qualitative design. The teachers were individually interviewed to examine their opinions on the alignment between student benchmarks and performance standards, the changes the performance standards have had on IEP progress, and which set of standards they believe is most appropriate or has had the best results for their students. Subsequent to the overall goal of the study several of the interviews also detailed descriptions of how effective teachers felt in teaching students who are behind in content subject matter.

## **Instrumentation**

The instrument that will be used are one-on-one semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is one in which the researcher audiotapes the interviews and transcribes them at a later date.

## **Procedures**

During the fall semester of 2017, the researcher meet with the teachers one-on-one to discuss the questions located in the Appendix. The interviews were conducted at the teacher's school and occur either during planning time or after school. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## **Data analysis**

The researcher read the transcriptions of the interviews to see if there are any common themes between the interviews or if there is anything that is drastically different

from the other teachers. The table below shows the codes that were used to identify important data from the transcripts

**Table 2: Themes and Codes**

<b>Professional Development</b>	
No Professional Development for Georgia Standards of Excellence	NPDG
Teachers don't need more professional development	NTPD
Teachers need more professional development	MPD
<b>Standards</b>	
Comfortable with standards	CS
Pros to standards change	PSC
Negatives to standards change	NSC
<b>Teaching</b>	
Co-teaching is beneficial to resource teaching	CT
Collaboration with others	CO
Lesson plans shared	LPS

## Limitations

The limitations of this study are that it is a small sample of teachers from rural southeast Georgia and it is opinion based.

## Results

Of the eight participants in this study six of them teach at the elementary school level and two of them teach at the middle school level, one of whom has taught high school previously. The eight teachers who participated in this study had a range of years

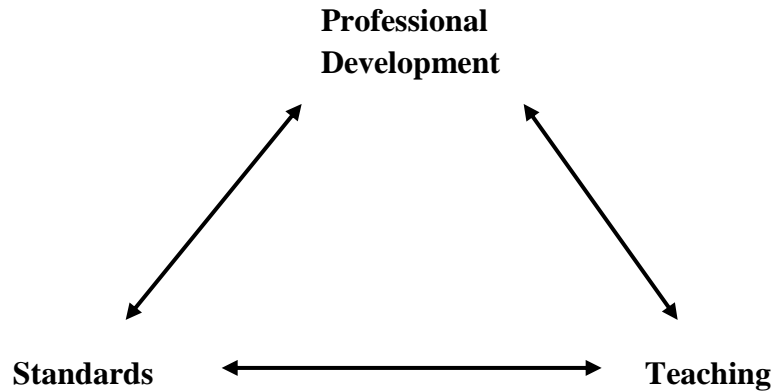


in the special education field spanning from 8 years to 33 years and have taught the Quality Core Curriculum standards (QCC) and Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). Half of the teachers interviewed reported that they were part of an educational organization, like the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). When asked about how they received training over the Common Core Standards the majority of the teachers said that they received training at the district level as opposed to receiving training in their professional learning communities (PLCs). When the teachers were asked about if they had received training on the newest set of standards five of the eight teachers said that they had received training on the Georgia Standards of Excellence, but that most of the training was done in a PLC setting as opposed to a district-wide training. The majority of the teachers also noted that they collaborated or at least shared lesson plans with other teachers, only one teacher said that she did not collaborate with others while planning for her students. The majority of the teachers also said that they were comfortable with either the English Language Arts (ELA) and/or mathematics standards they are required to teach. Whitney was the only teacher who said that she did not feel completely comfortable with teaching the math standards. When she was questioned further about why this was she said, “I feel like the math standards have changed a lot... so what I used to teach in second and third grade is now taught maybe in first”. She also expressed that she felt like she had a lot of questions on how to teach the standards that might be answered if she had received training on how to teach the math Georgia Standards of Excellence. Only one teacher felt as though one set of standards yielded more growth in student performance than the other standards. The standards she felt

resulted in more student growth were the Quality Core Curriculum standards. Several of the other teachers mentioned that the Common Core Standards and the Georgia Standards of Excellence are very similar.

Throughout the interviews the teachers mentioned benefits and challenges to the implementation of the new standards for students in special education. Some of the benefits that the teachers mentioned included: “increased rigor”, the standards have the students defend their answers and ideas which teaches them to infer, “student can explain to you what they are learning”, and “[the] continuity of the way subjects are taught” (building off of previous standards). Some of the challenges that the teachers mentioned included: “increases pressure on the students”, “the way things are taught isn’t the way all the students learn information”, “teachers pigeon holed into following the standards strictly instead of being allowed to branch out and use their experience and prior knowledge to assist”, and “it [the implementation] wasn’t done well... we were kind a step behind”.

Overall the results of this study can be summed up into three points: professional development improves teachers’ comfort with teaching the requires standards, collaboration and shared lesson plans improve teachers’ comfort with teaching the required standards, and professional development on how to use or unpack the standards improves the teachers’ ability to teach the required standards. The relationship between these three points can be seen in the figure below.

**Figure 1.****Similarities between participants**

Some similarities among the participants that the researcher noted included that all the participants were white females, all the participants either teach English language arts and/or math, and they shared benefits and weakness to the new standards that were similar.

For example, one pro that several of the participants shared was that the students are able to explain what they are learning, or that they have ownership of the material being taught.

**Differences between participants**

Some differences among the participants that the researcher noted included that there were varying amounts of experience in special education, some are currently co-teaching, some have co-taught in the past, some have never co-taught, and one of teacher's class is a self-contained severe and profound class.

**What new teachers can learn from this?**

Some things that a new teacher can learn from this study include: take advantage of the professional development offered in your district and collaborate with other teachers. This study found that professional development can be beneficial in understanding new standards and professional development specifically on how to unpack or use standards can improve teachers' comforts in teaching as directed by the standards. This study also found that collaboration with other teachers can also be helpful when teaching new standards.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the literature above, there are those who feel like the Common Core Standards are flawed and do not accommodate students with disabilities enough. However, based on the results of this study, professional development can be helpful in understanding new standards and professional development specifically on how to unpack or use the standards can improves teachers' comfort in teaching the required standards. Another thing that teachers noted as being helpful when teaching new standards is collaboration, whether its through sharing lesson plans or sharing a common planning time.

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## Appendix

1. What grade and subjects do you teach?
2. How long have you taught special education?
3. Are you involved with any national, state, and/or local educational organizations?
4. Have you received any training or professional development for teaching  
Common Core?
5. Do you think teachers should receive more professional development on this  
topic?
6. Do you collaborate with other teachers when planning lessons?
7. Do you feel training with Common Core is important for teachers?
8. Do you feel comfortable with your skills and knowledge of the English Language  
Arts Common Core Standards?
9. Do you feel comfortable with your skills and knowledge of the Math Common  
Core Standards?
10. If you have used standards besides Common Core to teach subject matter, what  
set of standards do you think has had the best results for your students?
11. Have you seen any benefits from the implementation of Common Core  
Standards?
12. What challenges, if any, have you seen with the implementation of Common Core  
Standards?
13. Is there anything else from your teaching experience that you would like to share?